



## EXHIBIT B

### NEEDS ASSESSMENT USING A CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

**There is no one recommended procedure that applicants should use in identifying community development needs and possible solutions for those needs.** As we noted previously, Montana's CDBG Program encourages local governments to take full advantage of their local planning programs and not unnecessarily duplicate their local planning efforts solely for the purposes of submitting a CDBG application. Frequently, a local government may have already identified community needs and priorities through preparation of a growth policy (comprehensive plan) and MDOC strongly encourages applicants to use their existing growth policy or plan to fulfill this requirement.

In the past, some local governments have assigned the task of identifying needs to an existing local planning board. This approach only makes sense if the planning board's other activities would allow it the time necessary to coordinate the needs assessment process. Many planning boards are so busy performing other duties, such as subdivision review or other planning responsibilities that this just is not a realistic option.

One of the most common approaches used by Montana communities in the past is to establish a citizens committee or task force to prepare the needs assessment. The committee should be composed of 5-7 individuals representing a variety of community interests. The governing body should appoint the committee members. If the community has a planning board, one board member should be appointed to the committee to assure coordination between the planning board and the committee. The planning board member may also be aware of past studies that the community has conducted or other information that will be helpful to the task force. The committee should conduct regular meetings. The citizens committee can use a variety of techniques to help it identify community needs and involve other citizens in the process, including community-wide town meetings, neighborhood meetings, or community surveys. Whatever approach is followed, the community must meet the minimum CDBG citizen participation requirements described previously.

The following is an example of a work program which outlines a basic sequence of events for using a citizen committee to prepare a needs assessment and an application for CDBG funding (or funding from any other state or federal program or private foundation.)

#### **A. CREATE COMMITTEE**

Refer to previous discussion.

#### **B. ORGANIZATION**

1. Elect a secretary - keep a chronological record of the needs assessment process so that you will be able to summarize the process (this is important for CDBG applications). Keep records of meetings and copies of all work products.
2. Develop work program and assign areas of individual responsibility (for example, one member gathers data on housing, one person assembles information on public facilities, etc.).
3. Set deadlines and create a task "time line" or schedule.

4. Put together a plan for informing local citizens and involving them in the needs assessment process. This should include developing methods to actively solicit citizen views (particularly those of low and moderate income residents if the community may apply for CDBG funds). Assign members to contact community groups and talk to people in person, determine who will contact the media, publicize the needs assessment process, and set the times for the public meetings. The secretary should keep a brief record of the efforts to involve the public such as meeting minutes, copies of newspaper clippings, attendance lists at meetings, etc.

## **C. INFORMATION AND DATA GATHERING**

1. Review any existing community plans or studies (e.g., growth policy, comprehensive plan), engineering or environmental studies, capital improvements plan, housing condition surveys and housing studies, housing plans, public opinion surveys, downtown studies, etc.) to identify community needs, goals and policies.
2. Acquire any information you feel is important for your assessment, such as U.S. Census data or other baseline information.
3. Contact community groups and attend their meetings to solicit their views.
4. Interview "key informants" such as long-time residents, local government officials and staff, the local newspaper editor, leaders of the business community, and other community leaders who may be knowledgeable about long-term community issues or problems or who may have additional insights. (The "key informant" approach for soliciting public opinion is discussed further in EXHIBIT A.) Frequently, these key members of the community or local government may be aware of critical issues of which the general public is unaware.

## **D. SOLICITING PUBLIC OPINION**

To encourage additional public involvement, the citizens committee and local officials can hold a town meeting or open house or even conduct a community opinion survey. Various options for soliciting public opinion and involving the public are discussed in more detail in later EXHIBITS.

## **E. PREPARING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR CDBG APPLICATIONS**

In the context of preparing an application for CDBG funding, this step is the heart of the community needs assessment process. The Federal Housing and Community Development Act requires that each CDBG recipient "identify its community development and housing needs, including the needs of low and moderate-income persons, and the activities to be undertaken to meet such needs."

**The Montana CDBG Program requires that each local government applicant for a CDBG Public Facilities or Housing project must conduct a planning process that considers and describes:**

1. **The applicant's community development needs, including the needs of low and moderate income persons; and**
2. **The activities it plans to meet the identified needs.**

### **Setting Priorities for Addressing Community Needs**

At this point in your local needs assessment process, you will need to evaluate the information and citizen comments you have obtained and try to answer the following questions:

- **What are our major community development and housing needs or problems?**
- **What can we do about them? What activities can be undertaken to deal with each need?**
- **What resources are available to help us deal with them? (For example, local, state or federal programs or private foundations.)**
- **Should the community apply for state or federal assistance to address any of these needs?**
- **When should we tackle these problems? What is our schedule for dealing with them?**

A common reaction for communities at this point in their needs assessment process is:

"All right, we've had our public meetings (or conducted our community survey or both) and we have a list of community needs identified. How do we decide which one to work on first (or which ones are best suited for assistance from various state or federal programs or private foundations)?"

For example, the project proposed in the community's CDBG application does not have to be the highest priority community need. There are a number of reasons, including the availability of other more appropriate local, state or federal public resources or private foundation grants, which would justify submitting an application for other than the top-ranked community need. Another reason is that certain types of projects historically have been more competitive under particular state or federal programs. In other cases, local elected officials are more aware of certain needs than are the general public. For example, frequently local citizens may cite streets surfacing or recreational facilities as a top priority because they are visible problems, while a city council is more concerned that the city's water quality is in violation of state health standards and the city faces fines if it does not improve local facilities. All of these are legitimate rationales for a local government to submit an application for a project which may have ranked lower as a community need through a community survey or during public meetings. However, it is important that the rationale for selecting the proposed project be explained.

One approach used by communities to decide which community need they should tackle first is to develop criteria to consider the various needs. Sometimes a community may have two or more needs that could be selected for a possible project. Examples of the types of criteria that have been used by other communities include:

- (a) the need involves the community's compliance with a law or regulation which has been mandated by a governmental agency;
- (b) the community faces an existing or potential threat to public health or safety;
- (c) the need is one that is consistent with the mission of a particular state or federal program and would therefore be more likely to be competitive under particular state or federal

grant programs. For example, in the CDBG context, if the problem especially affects low or moderate income families, it may be more appropriate for a program such as CDBG;

- (d) the need affects the entire community as opposed to one neighborhood;
- (e) the need is one on which a strong community consensus exists;
- (f) the need is a long-term problem which has been identified in past plans or studies, or solution of the problem would have a long-term positive impact on the viability of the whole community; or
- (g) the need is one for which state or federal financial assistance is more likely to be available.

As a final step, the needs assessment committee should summarize the recommendations made relative to the major needs that were identified and how they were finally ranked in order of priority. This documentation can consist of reference to community plans or studies, public comments, or other considerations.

During the last several years, an increasing number of local governments have prepared long-range capital improvements plans (CIP's) for their communities. A CIP outlines the community's long-range plan (usually five years) for major community investments such as water and wastewater systems, streets, storm sewers, parks, and so on. A CIP can help communities reduce the costs to construct, maintain, or repair public facilities by identifying local public facility needs, establish project priorities, and creating a program for the scheduling and funding of construction or repair projects.

### **Overall Community Improvement Plan**

More recently, several communities have broadened the CIP concept to prepare what might be termed an Overall Community Improvement Plan. Some communities have termed theirs an "Action Plan" or "Strategic Plan." These plans include the public facilities needs typically found in a CIP and, in addition, incorporate overall community projects such those related to economic development, housing, social services, etc.

This more comprehensive approach provides an excellent format to bring all of a community's priority needs together for comparison and can be a very useful way to portray a community's overall needs and opportunities for community improvements to the public. Summarizing the community's priorities in this manner can give local officials and residents a "road map" for community improvement projects over the long term. For example, Missoula County has used this approach in the past. As the example of the Community Action Plan prepared by Darby demonstrates, this approach is "do-able" for even Montana's smaller communities.

An outline of what might be included in an Overall Community Improvement Plan would be:

- a. an inventory of existing public facilities and services, and a description of economic and housing conditions
- b. population projections for the community and an analysis of their potential impact on existing public facilities and services and economic and housing conditions

- c. identification of possible community improvement projects, ranked according to their relative priority
- d. a listing of the year in which each project would be scheduled to be started and completed
- e. the estimated cost of each project
- f. a listing of the potential funding sources for each project and potentially available amounts of assistance
- g. identification of any prerequisites or special requirements associated with the listed potential funding sources that will have to be dealt with

The Community Action Plans prepared by the small communities of Corvallis and Darby that were described earlier are good examples of a more comprehensive overall community improvement plan that goes beyond the more narrow public facilities or infrastructure focus of a Capital Improvements Plan.

#### **F. BEGIN GRANT APPLICATION PREPARATION**

1. If the community has decided to apply for state or federal funds, one person should be assigned as the “ramrod” to be in charge of preparing the grant application (or applications) and assembling the required forms and documentation. That person could be the local planning director, an engineer, a public-spirited volunteer, or a private grant writing consultant.
2. The role of the needs assessment committee is to assist that person by gathering any additional information which may be necessary for grant preparation, and by reviewing the draft of the application and suggesting improvements before it is submitted.

#### **G. PRIOR TO SUBMITTING THE CDBG APPLICATION, HOLD THE SECOND PUBLIC HEARING**

The purpose of the second public hearing is to give citizens and potential beneficiaries of the proposed project adequate opportunity to review and comment on the community's CDBG application, before it is submitted. The issues which should be considered include the proposed project location, proposed activities, budget, and any costs that will be imposed on residents as a result of the project (particularly those of low and moderate income). For example, if the CDBG funds will partially fund a public facility project that will result in increased user charges or a property tax assessment, make sure local citizens are aware of this and are supportive of the proposal, before the city proceeds with the CDBG application.

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This completes the outline of one approach to a needs assessment process. This is only an example. The approach used by each community has to be tailored to its own unique situation.